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Title : Discovery of a blue whale, *Balaenoptera musculus*, summering ground in southern Chile: implications for research and conservation

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Abstract : Considering the extensive exploitation to which blue whales were subject - reducing most populations to less than 3% of its original numbers- and that their wide-ranging behavior and inaccessibility has always made research on this species difficult, the discovery and scientific monitoring of readily accessible aggregations of blue whales is of fundamental importance. Here, we report the discovery of a notable blue whale feeding and nursing ground located in southern Chile and discuss the directions for future research and implications for conservation of this endangered species. Based on historical accounts and recent opportunistic sightings a combination of eight aerial and two marine surveys were undertaken between January and April, 2003 in Chilean coastal waters with the main objective of identifying blue whale general distribution and seasonal occurrence patterns. Within the waters lying between 42° S 73 W and 45° S 75 W (Western Chiloé Island and Gulf of Corcovado), a total of 47 groups of 153 blue whales were sighted (mean group size = 3,255; range 1-12), including 8 mother-calf pairs. Blue whale use of this protected system of islands, channels and fjords during summer, where high productivity and zooplankton retention due to circulatory patterns influenced by topographic and bathymetric features, might reflect the adoption of an alternative life strategy that allow whales to obviate migration during the austral summer and possibly remain year-round in mid latitudes. Derived from our results, the notable importance of this area becomes evident since it can be regarded as the most significant blue whale aggregation ground discovered up to date in the Eastern South Pacific.